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SUBJECT: HUGO CHAVEZ VISITS HAVANA: DEATH WATCH OR PROOF OF
LIFE?

Classified By: A/DCM: Greg Adams for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez paid an unannounced (in Cuba) visit to Havana on June 16. His arrival scrambled air traffic at Jose Marti airport, resulting in several arriving USINT personnel being diverted briefly to Varadero.

¶2. (U) According to press reports, Chavez met for three hours with Fidel Castro, whom he described as "alive and kicking." Chavez also conducted a press conference at which he trumpeted the economic advances of the ALBA, lauded efforts of countries in the region to reject continued U.S. imperialism characterized by threatening military bases in Curacao and Manta, Ecuador, and predicted a sound defeat of the Venezuelan opposition by his PSUV party in the upcoming November elections.

¶3. (U) Chavez' remarks were cited extensively in the official Cuban media, but to date there has been no mention from Cuban sources of what Fidel might have said, nor were there any photos or video clips of the two together.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: It is not clear if the Chavez visit is just another in a string of head of state visits (e.g., Uruguayan President Tabare Vazquez arrives today) that appears to be simply a chance to pay last respects to Fidel Castro, or an urgently arranged show to counteract rumors running through the Miami community that the Comandante is already dead. We tend to believe the latter. Even if that is the case, however, the fact that Fidel has not been photographed since Lula's visit in January (and then only in still photos), nor heard since he called in to Alo Presidente in November 2007, lends credence to speculation that he is in extremely poor shape at best. His latest "Reflexiones" column, which came out last week, is perhaps the most incoherent yet. In the meantime, the regime continues to milk visits like those of Uruguayan President Vazquez for all of the propaganda value it can.

PARMLY